

The Aftermath clean version, finished

by SinnersandSaints

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Summary: This is the story about Link and Tracy's hardships during the summer following the Ms. Hairspray pageant. Rated T because someone does drugs. The type and how are not explained. There is no profanity or vulgarity.

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Disclaimer and Author's notes:

I do not claim to own any rights to anything related to Hairspray the original movie or the 2007 musical or any incarnation, fan fiction, or Broadway show, ad infinitum. I am making no money from this posting and do so only because I genuinely love speculating on how to expand the characters with my imagination.

This is a common theme in Hairspray fanfiction, but I am absolutely new to Hairspray, having previously only seen the campy original. This is the cleaned up version of "The Aftermath" but I left it with a "T" rating as I couldn't get away from some of it without losing the plot point. If you do come across, please read and review. I think the hairspray forums are pretty much dead, but it'd be nice to know someone out there liked it.

/end notes and disclaimer/

Tracy Turnblad wasn't often unoptimistic. The weight of bigotry never caused her shoulders to droop. Her own hardships had not caused her to open her heart to the colored children. Fairness did. She correctly saw them as her equals as individuals, though she way preferred their dance moves! Tracy could never understand the burdens placed upon coloreds by society but she retained an inkling of what being excluded felt like. Her tender heart and talented feet had earned her a place in the heart of everyone in Baltimore who watched the Corny Collins show as well as those who were present when her soon to be boyfriend Link Larkin grabbed the hand of a little girl

and drug her center stage to dance. Inez and Link as well as votes from people all around Baltimore had put an end to needless segregation. The time for differences had gone, and everyone was beginning to see their similarities instead of forcing a dividing wall of differences between themselves.

Tracy's eyes fluttered dreamily. She pulled her blankets closer to her chin. She replayed her first kiss with Link over and over in her mind. His lips were so soft. His nose had brushed hers. The single curled hair that fell over his forehead had tickled her for a moment and then it was gone again.

Tracy wasn't aware she had fallen asleep until she had been woken by angry voices down the hall. She was frightened, but moreover curious. Tracy slipped out of her bed and tiptoed down the hallway.

"You will not remove my daughter from this house!" her mother said, stomping a heavy foot to the floor. She watched as a police officer advanced on her mother. Tracy gasped, slapping her hand to her mouth to silence herself.

"Wait just one cotton pickin' minute there, son," Tracy's father said, inserting his thin body between the muscular cop and his corpulent wife. "A real man does not step up to a woman. I demand you apologize to my wife." The officer's face softened.

"I'm sorry sir, ma'am," he said. "But Tracy did hit the officer. Because of her popularity, all the police chief is asking for is an apology."

"An apology? That officer slandered my baby! She never hit that man with a crowbar! I was there!" Mrs. Turnblad said, her arms flailing behind her husband.

"I was too, Mrs. Turnblad. I saw what your daughter did. She was wrong to hit him, but the police department is releasing an official statement tomorrow to clarify what actually happened. People aren't too happy about this integration thing. Now, I don't have any problem with it, but it is going to take time for this situation to blow over. I won't take Tracy in, but I respectfully ask that you bring her in tomorrow morning. This is going to be a mutual apology." The officer removed his hat. "Please, ma'am. You have my word she won't be booked. It is completely innocent." Mrs. Turnblad eyed the man up and down.

"Let's do it, baby," Mr. Turnblad said. "I don't see the harm. It could heal a rift. That's what our daughter is best at, right? Making things better?"

"Hm... alright then. But my mother always told me to seal a promise with a pound cake. Are you up for a late night gobble, officer?"

"If it wouldn't inconvenience you, ma'am."

"Not at all! Come on with me!" she said, sashaying out of the room.

"Sir?" the officer asked, inviting him to partake of the pound cake pact. Mr. Turnblad shook his head in the negative and turned the other way. Tracy saw her father heading for her room. She sprinted

back to bed and jumped in, rolling over with her back to the door. She pretended to be asleep when her father silently entered. He began stroking her hair and she heard him sigh sadly.

"My sweet little girl, you've grown so fast. You and your mother are the best parts of my life. I can die happy knowing that we raised a beautiful, talented, kind hearted child," he paused, scoffing to himself. "I guess you ain't really much of a child anymore, are you? You're a young woman now. I have always believed in you. I know you will always try your best to do the right thing." Tracy began to sniff and her father paused. "Trace?"

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I'm awake." She rolled over to face him. "I heard voices in the living room and I got up to see what was going on. I thought you'd be mad if you knew I was awake."

"No... Of course not."

"Do you really mean those things you said, Daddy? About how you're proud of me?"

"I do, little one. Every single word. If I had known you were awake that conversation may have been harder. I've never been very good at expressing my emotions. Except laughter, that is." Tracy smiled. "Your mother has pound cake. Do you want to come have some?"

"I'm not really hungry. Besides, I'm nervous about tomorrow."

"There's nothing to worry about. The police want this to blow over before they risk being demonized."

"I don't know about that. It seems like the media was on their side."

"Don't worry about it, kiddo. They don't want this to get messy. A simple apology and that will be that."

"I hope you're right," she muttered. Mr. Turnblad leaned down and kissed his daughter's forehead.

"I quite like your hair down like that. It makes you look more grown up."

"Thanks Daddy," she smiled brightly. Her father returned her smile and then turned and left the bedroom. Tracy frowned for a moment. Really, how bad could it be to apologize to the offer? The apology they owed her was greater. They would be taking a hit, not her. She just hoped the police officer wasn't lying to her mother.

Tracy woke to the friendly caress of warm sun against her slumbering lids. She yawned and stretched, sitting up in her bed. The birds outside chattered away like old people drinking their morning coffee together at the cafe a couple of doors down. Tracy slid out of bed and dressed herself. She considered calling Link but decided it might be too early. She felt her cheeks flush when she remembered their kiss again. That kiss had been broadcast live. Everyone had seen it. Everyone would know he was hers and she was his. A chill ran down her spine, and her stomach felt like it flipped. She bit her lip.

Tracy walked out of her room toward the kitchen. The smell of pancakes and the promise of crispy sausage wafted through the house. She wasn't sure she would be able to eat. Her nerves were bunched due to the day's agenda. She could hear her mother going on and on about how much she loved to cook. Tracy heard the whip of a newspaper page being turned. Her father probably wasn't paying much attention to the conversation, but he wasn't much of a talker unless he was selling fake dog doo.

"Gooood morn-ING!" she exclaimed, her voice rising in horror at the end. Link sat perfectly coiffed as always at the table with a mouthful of pancakes. His eyes grew as wide as hers and both of their cheeks flushed as she ran out of the kitchen and back toward her room. She grabbed her hair brush and drew it through her tresses, trying to tame them enough to be presentable. There was a soft knock at her door. "Come in," she said softly. The door opened and Link stood there, his cheeks still softly tinted. "I'm... my hair, good morning, sorry!" she said, taking a step back and almost stumbling over her own feet. Link advanced in one long stride and steadied her.

"Mmm... good morning," he said, leaning in to kiss her.

"Link, I..." she tried to protest. She hadn't brushed her teeth yet! Link's lips were upon hers and within moments his charm had caused her to melt. Her lips fell open and the taste of syrup invaded her mouth. She began to giggle and he pulled away, a quizzical look on his face. "Your kiss was syrupy sweet."

"Yours was sweeter," he said, cocking his grin to the side. Her heart melted, and she leaned up on her tip toes to plant a chaste kiss on his lips.

"What are you doing here?"

"What?" he asked, his eyebrows drawn in concern.

"No! I mean what are you doing here so early?"

"Oh!" he smiled, relaxing. "It... I was... I was in the neighborhood," he paused, sighing. "I can't lie to those eyes," his said, his voice falling to a growl. Tracy felt her insides squirm. "I wanted to call you, but I figured waiting for you to wake up might be better. Want to come have some breakfast with me?"

"Of course, now that I don't look like a sea hag!"

"Sweetheart, you could never look like a sea hag. I liked your sleepy eyes and your roll out of bed hair. It was cute." Tracy blushed looking away. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing... it's just that you called me sweetheart."

"Aren't you my sweetheart?"

"Am I?"

"Well, that would be reason two I came over," he said, digging in his pocket and producing his pin. "I wanted to wait until after breakfast, but-"

"Yes, Link Larkin! I will go steady with you!" she excitedly said, clasping her hands and jumping in place. Link chuckled to himself. Link pinned Tracy's collar and then leaned down and brushed his lips against hers.

"Ahem!" came her mother's interruption from the hallway. "Breakfast is getting cold, kids," she said turning her back on the room. "And you're both getting too warm," she muttered to herself as she shuffled away. Link watched as the light in a door frame was eclipsed by Edna Turnblad's girth. He turned back to Tracy and pulled her tightly to his chest. He kissed her again, this time abandoning the soft, sweet kisses they had exchanged before. He gave her a hard, deep kiss. He broke the kiss panting moments later and Tracy gasped for air.

"Baby!" she squeaked, and Link chuckled.

"Baby, eh?" he said. She blushed and he leaned down to kiss her nose. "Come on before I do something to you your mother really wouldn't like."

"What?" she asked, but Link didn't answer her question as he pulled her toward the kitchen.

"So you kids are official now?" Tracy's father said, folding his paper in half and setting it to the side. Link's half eaten pancake stack had been replaced with a new one and a plate of sausages. Mrs. Turnblad placed a platter of pancakes in front of Tracy.

"We sure are, Daddy!" Tracy chirped.

"OWMAHGOWTHEEZEPONCAKEZRZOGOOD!" Link said through a bite. Tracy giggled.

"I think he likes those more than he likes me!" she joked. Link shot her a look.

"Pancakes are just one of the many perks of being with you," he said, squeezing her hand.

"Oh honey, they remind me of us!" Mrs. Turnblad said, taking a seat next to her husband. She fed him a bite of sausage, and then gave him a sweet kiss on the lips. Tracy smiled at her parents disbelieving of the blissful situation she found them all to be in. Reality crashed down like a ton of bricks. Without realizing it, Tracy had spaced out. She was holding her fork and knife but had yet to eat anything. Link was two pancakes into the four stacked on his plate.

"BAY?Whawron?" he asked. Mrs. Turnblad removed herself from the table long enough to retrieve the milk from the refrigerator. The glass bottle clinked against Link's glass as she filled it back to the top. Link swallowed his food.

"Trace?" he asked.

"What?" she asked, realizing he had been speaking to her. "Oh, nothing!", she tried to cover. "I have an errand to run sometime

today."

"I can take you if you want."

"No, I think I'll let my Mom bring me."

"I'm going too, Tracy. You're not going without me," her father said. Link put down his fork and wiped his mouth.

"Does anyone want to fill me in on what's going on here?"

"Well..." Mrs. Turnblad slowly began and then the whole shebang about the previous night's debacle rolled from her almost too quickly for Link to understand.

"So... this is about the police?" he asked, and the family three nodded. "Okay then. We can go after breakfast."

"We?" Tracy asked. "No, Link, you don't have..."

"Of course I don't have to, sweetheart. My choice is to always be by your side. To stick with you through thick and thin."

"More thick than thin!" she joked. He smirked at her and shoved another forkful of pancakes into his mouth.

"Will you still feel that way when I'm the thick one?" he asked after swallowing.

"Link Larkin, I always thought you were cute and a great dancer. Whatever I thought about you became more real when you believed in me. You took up for me when no one else would. I don't care that other people don't think I fit in. I care that your heart opened up to me and you saw just how wonderful I can be. I knew you would!"

"I wouldn't have agreed with you until all of these circumstances changed the course of what would have been. I shudder to think that without you I would still be on the arm of a girl whose only concern ends at the point of her own nose. You are every bit as beautiful as she is on the outside, but you're far better on the inside than she is. My favorite thing about you isn't even what a swell dancer you are. It's that you're never afraid to have fun. Every day with you is a new adventure."

"Link Larkin, if you don't quit I'm going to be crying all day!" Mrs. Turnblad said, burying her face in her husband's shoulder. He cooed soothing words as she whimpered.

"I love you, Trace," Link mouthed silently.

"I love you Link," she whispered, before blushing and looking away.

After breakfast Link insisted on helping Tracy with the dishes while her parents got ready to go to the police station. Tracy washed and Link rinsed the dishes and stood them in the rack. Tracy hummed a song aloud and shook her hips to the beat. He tapped his toes and bobbed his head smiling at her. He resisted the urge to reach over and grab a handful of her backside.

When her parents were ready and the dishes were done, the foursome grouped into the Turnblad family car and rode down to the police station. Once there, Link wrapped a protective arm around Tracy, and her parents split apart to flank the young couple. The woman behind the front desk stood up when she saw them enter. She waved for them to have a seat, and she left. Tracy's heart was racing. She balled her hands in her lap, willing them not to shake. Link's other hand swooped over and rested on top of hers.

"It will be okay," he whispered in her ear. She wanted to believe him. She laid her head on his shoulder. As the seemingly endless minutes ticked away, Mr. and Mrs. Turnblad made small, polite chat with other people waiting closeby.

"Tracy Turnblad?" the nasally voice of the receptionist called. Tracy had not even noticed the woman enter the room. She stood and tugged at the bottom of her skirt. Link never removed his arm as she and her parents walked forward. "Eh, sorry kid, but you have to go in to see Judge Rampart by yourself."

"No, we're going with her!" Link protested. Mr. Turnblad put his hand on Link's shoulder and pulled him backward. Edna moved forward and looked back at her husband and he shook his head in the negative.

"We play by their rules and Tracy will be okay," he said. Mrs. Turnblad made a face but nodded. Link slowly released the hand that still rested on Tracy and nudged her to move foreward.

"It's going to be alright," he said. Tracy gave him a small smile in return and then followed the receptionist out of the room. Mr. Turnblad sat back down in the waiting area next to Mrs. Turnblad. Link sat beside them tapping his toes impatiently.

Thirty minutes passed before anyone had an update for them. The same police officer from the night before came barreling toward the Turnblads.

"I'm so sorry," he said, his face scrunching tightly. "They lied to me. They said it would only be an apology!"

"What? What have they done? What are they doing to my daughter?" Mrs. Turnblad said, thrusting herself up from the chair. She loomed almost a full foot taller than the officer. Link was immediately by Mrs. Turnblad's side, not quite as tall as the officer. Mr. Turnblad wrapped his arms around his daughter's new hot head boyfriend.

"It's not as bad as you think," he said, and moments later Tracy walked from the back. Link broke free from her father's embrace and wrapped his arms around Tracy.

"Darlin', what happened?"

"It's not so bad. I didn't get a personal apology. The news story aired when the stations came on this morning and that will be the only airing. I still had to apologize. In exchange for not being detained, I have to do community service after school."

"You meanâ€¦|"

"I can't be on the show anymore. Not until my punishment is over anyway."

"That's not fair!" Link protested, but Tracy shook her head. "It's the best they will give me and I accepted."

"I knew something was up when they wouldn't allow her parents in! She is a minor; she cannot make decisions for herself! AND YOU!" her voice boomed as she turned on the officer beside her. "You promised over pound cake!"

"I'm so sorry Mrs. Turnblad! She wasn't booked at least! I didn't know they were going to do this!"

"Everybody calm down!" Tracy said. "I shouldn't have hit that officer, and though I was wronged, I can't turn my back on what is right. It is right that I serve my community, and it is right that I leave the show so as not to tarnish its image. I will get to go back after ninety days."

"The show is over for summer break in a couple of weeks!" Link said. "Andâ€¦ there's something I have to tell you about the summer."

"Link?" she questioned the change in his tone.

"Not here. We'll talk about this later." Tracy nodded.

"Can we just get out of here?" she asked. The party began walking outside. Mrs. Turnblad turned angry eyes toward the apologetic officer. He frowned and she shook her head at him.

The car ride back to Tracy's house was mostly quiet. Link reached for Tracy's hand and she allowed him to take it, but as the moments ticked on she slowly removed it from his grasp and squeezed herself farther away from him. He wondered what he had done to be punished.

Back at Tracy's house, Mr. Turnblad went downstairs to open up the joke shop. Mrs. Turnblad was behind on ironing, and set to work. She told Link and Tracy to leave her bedroom door open, but Link closed it quietly behind himself.

"Sit." He gestured to the bed. Tracy sat and he stood before her. He paced for a moment and then clasped his hands together as though he had caught the right words out of midair. "Trace, there's yet another reason I'm here, and the order of things went kind of queer, so just bear with me, okay?" he asked and she nodded. "Last night after you had to go, I was approached by one of the agents. He really likes me andâ€¦ well, about this summerâ€¦ I won't be here."

"What?" she exclaimed sadly. Tracy composed herself and waited for his response.

"I've been offered a chance to sing at hops all over the country. I will be riding all over the country by bus. But I can call you!" he said, slipping to the ground on his knees. He stared up at her from the floor and took her hands in his. "I get to dance and sing all summer. This could be my big break! Please, Trace, say something, anything!"

"I'm so proud of you!" she said quietly. Her face beamed sincerely. "I believe in you and I am behind you all the way. Butâ€¦" she said, pulling her hands from his and reaching for his pin. "I guess you'll want this back."

"No," he said, placing his hand over hers. She removed her hand and his lay on her collarbone. "This is my promise to you. There will be no other women."

"Link, seriously," she said, sliding off of the bed and turning her back to him. He pushed himself from the floor and stood behind her. "How can I ask you to be faithful?"

"How could I not be?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her from behind. "I love you, Tracy Turnblad."

"We're still so young. I'm waiting for you to change your mind."

"Where is this coming from? That doesn't even sound like you."

"I may be dreamy eyed and fanciful, but life has opened up my eyes, Link. Sure, Corny Collins is now integrated. Sure Negroes are one step closer to equality. But there are still ugly things in the world. There are hateful bigots and mean girls andâ€¦ lonely boys."

"Okay, so I'll be lonely. But I'll call from every city every chance I get. I'll even be back in time for your birthday! Please, Tracy. You said you believed in me. Don't lose faith now." Tracy turned around. She flushed when her eyes locked with his. He hooked his arms around her tightly. He kissed her softly on the lips. "Come on, Darlin'. Let's dance!" he said. Tracy smiled, and spun away from him. She clicked on the record player and moments later she and her beau were mashing potatoes in a most professional way.

Time flew by until the summer came and then it seemed to drag like molasses in winter. Tracy had been showing up faithfully to the police station to take care of her community service obligations. She hardly had time to see Link due to Corny Collins practices and then rehearsals for the upcoming summer tour afterward. All he had asked for was faith, and Tracy was determined to give it to him.

The Judge had taken a liking to the ever cheerful Tracy Turnblad and had decided to officially pardon her for the day of Link's departure, and reduce her sentence to only two more weeks. Link waited beside the bus both excited to be going and depressed at having hardly seen his sweetheart. His heart fluttered when he saw her running toward him. He ran forward and embraced her. He hugged her tightly.

"I've missed you so much, baby," he said into her hair.

"I've missed you too," Tracy said. He pulled back and leaned his forehead down to hers and stared into her eyes. "Those pretty, brown, smilin' eyes," he remarked. "I think I'll miss those the most."

"Oh," she giggled. "I thought you'd miss my lips." Link growled in his throat and pressed his lips to hers. She kissed back sweetly

until Link shoved his tongue between her lips and forced them to open. She reacted for a moment and then rested in his arms and allowed him to kiss her more passionately. Their first kiss had been seen by the entire city. What would another be to the crowd?

Link reluctantly broke away. "Remember, you promised you'd wait for me."

"Forever and ever, babe." He smiled at her and she smiled back.

"Hey, come on cat, we gotta roll!" someone Tracy didn't recognize hollered from the bus.

"I'll call every day!" he promised, and Tracy had smiled. She waved cheerfully as he jogged toward the bus and climbed on. Link found the back window of the bus and waved at Tracy from it. She waved and waved until Link was out of sight. Tracy lost her composure and began to cry. Link rested his head on the bus window. His eyes misted, but he refused to cry. This wasn't goodbye. It was 'so long for the summer'. It was 'this is my chance to give us a better life.'

"This here's Motormouth Maybelle,"

"And I'm Corny Collins,"

"Comin' to you live at five with a countrified jive, y'all!"

"It's time for our all new program, 'Summer Break'!"

"Yeah you heard that right, y'all! Corny and I are takin' the floor so lock the door, grab the knob off the tube and twist because we about to get down with the newest-"

"Coolest-"

"latest mix! You ain't ever seen nothin' like this!"

"Bring 'em on out let's hear it for the Kids! R-r-r-role call!"

"Aw man, school is out!" Seaweed said. "But I'm Seaweed, and this here's Inez."

"And she is Amber," Inez said.

"And that's Joel," Amber said with a hint of pleasure. A tall, dark young man smiled back at her.

"And this Is IQ!" Joel said. IQ went on to introduce others until all twelve of the kids had been recognized. Tracy didn't feel sorry for herself for being unable to be on the Corny Collins show or on his and Maybelle's new show. The following year Tracy would be a senior and she would have her final year on the show. It was a dream come true to be invited on in the first place. . Had it not been for Linkâ€¦ Link, her Link, her beloved, blue eyed sweetheart. He promised to be back in time for her eighteenth birthday party. Tracy's eyes had landed on the phone. She hadn't heard from Link in three days. In the beginning it had been every single day, and every day slacked off to two days and now it had been three official days.

No, she thought to herself, _no tears, no worry, no wait. He's tired. He's on a bus and can't call. He's doing an interview. He has to make time for rehearsal. They're talking about signing him forever! Forever? What would that mean for us? Would he forget about me never to return? No, never. He loves me. He said so. And the way he kisses!_ Tracy closed her eyes tightly and imagined Link's arms around her waist and his lips hovering over her own. She bit her bottom lip.

"Hey Tracy! You might want to pay attention unless you want to be the only girl in Baltimore that doesn't know how to do Inez's dance!" Penny said. Tracy opened her eyes and was ready to sheepishly concur when she fell backward over the ottoman and landed with a heavy thud on the ground. Penny was immediately by her side. Mrs. Turnblad was also there, seeming to materialized in the room. Tracy began to laugh so hard her sides hurt.

"I can't believe Tracy Turnblad fell! You're the most graceful dancer I know!"

"How is your coconut, dear?" Mrs. Turnblad said, lifting her daughter's head from the floor and running her fingers along it looking for lumps.

"I'm fine mom!" Tracy finally managed to make out. "I just can't stop laughing! I can't believe I fell! I've never fallen!"

"Yes, well, accidents can happen at any time! I want you in here early to clear out the furniture before you dance from now on. And be sure you roll up the rug, too."

"Yes ma'am," Tracy said. Penny reached down and helped Tracy to her feet. So what if Link hadn't called? He would! She had to have a little faith! It was very easy for Tracy to have faith. Her faith rode on her love for Link.

The summer had really begun to sizzle. Ice cream seemed to melt before the cone ever made it out of the truck. Mrs. Turnblad was thankful that they had an electric refrigerator and not an icebox like she had growing up. It was so hot, the ice would have melted before it made it to the box! Her mother before her had an ice house. The ice was almost always covered in hay to keep it longer. That was a method far older than most people of her time used. Mrs. Turnblad marveled at all of the modern conveniences, including her trusty electric iron. She heard the television roar to life, and she smiled to herself. Her fearless little girl had changed the world. That silly girl who danced as though her life literally depended on it. She was proud of that little girl who loved everyone unconditionally, even when it was considered wrong to do so. Mrs. Turnblad set her iron down and walked quietly toward her living room. Edna wasn't exactly aware that she wasn't quiet though she meant to be, but the girls did not seem to notice her. All of the furniture had been moved and the rug had been rolled up and set to the side. She nodded in approval. Her eyes spotted her pink rotary phone resting on a table pulled closer to them. She shook her head sadly. Edna had wanted her little girl to be happy, but deep inside she had always wondered about Link's sincerity. He was, after all, very desirable to the teens in town. He had stepped outside of his comfort zone and embraced her daughter. She had heard him say he loved Tracy, and she

had seen the same look in his eye that Wilbur had adopted since their little talk. To think that evil Mrs. Von Tussel had saved their marriage instead of destroying it. Wilbur had become friskier, and Edna had felt more desirable, and life had felt so much better all-around because of one little girl. Mrs. Turnblad smiled to herself and returned to her ironing.

Penny and Tracy were watching "Summer Break". Their feet were kicking and their fingers were snapping and their hips were swaying to the music. The same introduction as always came onto the screen. It was still funny, even mid-summer, when Corny would cry out for Role Call and be cut off by Seaweed. Penny would always swoon and remark about how powerful and authoritative Seaweed was. Tracy laughed at Penny's joke the first time, until she realized that Penny wasn't joking. She really thought it was impressive and brave for him to silence an authority figure, even in a playful manner. Seaweed had told them that Corny had approved his idea for next summer's intro. They would say something different than "Role Call" each time, and it would be playful banter between Seaweed and Corny. Most shows of the time didn't stray far from the formulaic, so it was a change they both felt would shake things up and keep it fresh. Despite it being on at 5 p.m. during the summer, the ratings were through the roof.

Penny bumped into Tracy accidentally and when she looked up to apologize she noticed that Tracy had stopped dancing. Penny popped her lolly pop from her mouth.

"Tracy, come on, Seaweed is about to show the rest of Baltimore how to do his newest move! Tracy?" she asked, following her friend's gaze. Tracy was staring at the phone again. Penny frowned. Tracy sighed, and for the first time in her life she did not feel like dancing.

"Penny! I just talked to Mrs. Jamison out in the hallway! She said your mother knows you're over here. I would hurry home if I were you!" Mrs. Turnblad bellowed from the kitchen. Penny popped her lolly back into her mouth.

"Don't worry," she said, though her words were muffled. "He'll call." Tracy tried to fake a smile for Penny's sake, but it was no use. Tracy Turnblad was no liar. Penny frowned. She clasped her friend's shoulder with her hand. "He pinned you before he left and he asked you to keep it. That means something, doesn't it?"

"I hope so," Tracy said, sliding on to the couch to watch the show.

"Penny! Now!" Mrs. Turnblad called. Penny rolled her eyes and then skipped out of the room. Tracy heard the door slam behind her. She watched Seaweed singing, shaking his shoulders, rolling his neck and whipping his arms about. She could easily keep up with those moves. _Keep thinkin' them up, Seaweed,_ she thought to herself. _You won't ever stump me!_ Tracy smiled to herself. Penny was right. There was no need to abstain from her favorite activities. Link would call soon. He had to.

Only he didn't.

Far away on a distant tour bus, Link for the first time partook of drugs, much to the amusement of those who had supplied him. Peer

pressure had been a foe he had always succumbed to until he had met the voluptuous Tracy Turnblad. She had been his power source, something Link hadn't realized until he got on the road with the guys. They talked about women as though they were disposable property. Link couldn't afford to be seen as a square so early on in the game. He said bad things about Amber and previous girlfriends, things he had done with them that perhaps he shouldn't have. He never said such things about Tracy, only that he loved her, which got him snickers and jabs from the band and crew. He would rather not speak of her than hear her slandered. The drummer had teased him for loving such a "hungry" girl. Link had cold cocked him. Since then, no one dared bring up Tracy's weight.

Link felt a power surge from the rush that was coming and soon he would be onstage to rock the crowd despite the exhaustion that clung to him like a wet robe. Link danced all day, travelled in the afternoon and partied all night. He smiled for cameras, wooed girls with a wink and thrust his pelvis in an Elvis like manner every time. It had all taken a toll on the young man.

He had turned eighteen earlier in the year, in March to be precise. He had wanted to take Tracy's innocence from her, but it felt like robbery. He stopped short and held her at arm's length when they were together. Things had to be done properly and honestly. She deserved no less than perfection.

The days seemed to blur together and sometimes they seemed years apart. Link began forgetting his words onstage and gyrating more than most parents could overlook. His manager pulled him aside and tried to talk to him, but the hold the band had on him was far too strong. Link Larkin had gone on a summer binge.

The third month of the tour was well under way when Link woke up in an unfamiliar bed. He didn't remember going into the hotel the night before, though they often stopped at hotels to rest. He stretched and rolled out of the bed. A draft chilled him, and Link looked down to see he wore only socks. He lifted the bed spread looking for his pajama bottoms. A fair haired girl was nestled under the blanket. She was slumbering peacefully. Link's eyes scanned the room. Other members of the band were there, too, wrapped in the arms of unfamiliar women in awkward human puzzle pieces strewn about the floor. Link cursed, running a hand through his hair. He grabbed the telephone from the table and brought it into the bathroom. He hooked his finger into the loop and turned the numbers on the rotary phone. It began to ring.

"Turnblad residence, Edna speaking."

"Mrs. Turnblad! It's Link."

"Link," he cringed at the tone of Mrs. Turnblad's voice. "We haven't heard from you in so long."

"What, like four or five days?"

"No, Link. You haven't called in almost two solid months. My daughter is only so strong. I don't appreciate you playing with her emotions."

"I'm sorry-"

"I agree. You are sorry. I don't know what has gotten into you. Your parents haven't even heard from you! Have you called them to check in?"

"Wellâ€¦ no, I-"

"Tracy isn't here, anyway. There's only so long a girl can wait by the phone before she moves on." Link heard the phone receiver clatter and he was disconnected.

Link ran a hand through his hair and sighed. He set the phone on the side of the tub and walked back into the room of people. He surveyed the room until his eyes finally landed on his clothes. They were tucked under the head of a sleeping girl. He carefully removed them and dressed himself, embarrassed at what might have been. There was a girl in his bed. There was a chance she was just sleeping there, but noâ€¦ Link knew he had been unfaithful to Tracy. His insides felt like they were liquefying. He wanted to throw up, but realized he hadn't eaten since breakfast the day before. His stomach protested and Link swallowed hard.

"Oh Godâ€¦" he murmured. He backed into the wall and slid down. He had to get home. He had to see his girl and she just had to forgive him. He had given in to the whims of others instead of sticking to his guns. Leaving Tracy to march alone had been his first lesson. This time, there was sure to be dire consequences.

The awkwardness ended soon after when the band manager entered the room and woke all of the sleeping partiers. He excused the random girls and gathered up the band and Link.

The six hour ride back to Baltimore had Link's stomach in knots. The tour was over. Tracy might never forgive him, and he very well may have blown his shot by doing drugs. His manager Kevin slid into the seat across from him.

"So, I heard last night got pretty crazy, eh?" Link didn't respond. He looked out the window, afraid opening his mouth would expose his shame. "Anyway, the girls think you're single, and the label loves this. You're a playboy. You deserve your pick of the stone cold foxes."

"I'm happily taken."

"Come on, manâ€¦ you don't even call that chick back home. And seriously, why would you? It's hard enough to keep up with one woman. Seems like she'd be like having two girlfriends." Link stood up.

"Hey you better -"

"Link!" his friend and band mate Scotty called, grabbing his friend by the shoulders and ripping him backward.

"Woah man, be cool, be cool!" Kevin said, raising his hands defensively. "The way you been actin' I just thought maybe she was some hometown fling."

"Don't refer to my wife as a fling again or I'll-."

"Your wife? When you got married?" Scotty asked. Link hadn't realized he'd used that particular word. The way it naturally and instinctively rolled from his tongue was surprising. It was a palatable word, one he wanted to use again and again in context to Tracy.

"Marriage would kill your career, kid. Chicks want a cat who is loose and free flyin'. Stop forgetting lyrics and keep gyrating and you'll have any bird you want eatin' out the palm of your hand. The label has big plans for you. As a matter of fact, we want to sign you to sing for the next year,"

"I've got school, it's senior year!"

"I've got a contract for you and it starts at 25,000."

"Dollars?" Link asked and Kevin chuckled.

"Yeah man, for one more year on the bus." Link thought about Tracy home without him for another year. Was one year of their lives worth the money? They could easily outright buy a new house and car and have half of it left. "Man, if this next year goes better than the summer, we'll have you in the studio recording those songs you're always writing down."

"Senior year of high school-"

"Man do you know how hard people work to bust out? Maybe it doesn't mean as much to you as someone who's been on the circuit for fifteen years."

"No man, I think it's a boss deal."

"Yeah? Well then, honkey cat, you'd better make up your mind. We're only taking a week before the bus rolls out again. You think you can hang?"

"You callin' me square?"

"Are you a square?"

"I'm too hip for cool, Daddio."

"That's what I want to hear! You've got a week to tie up any loose ends."

"Loose endsâ€¦ that's not code for dump Tracy is it?"

"I don't think you have to worry about that part, kid. But you've got to understand, the label wants a free spirit that can't be tamed. They don't want a boy in puppy love chained to his woman's ankle. After this year man, we can talk it over and maybe they'll be cool with you settling down. Anyway, a heavy wife might draw in jealous fans."

"Tracy is perfect just the way she is."

"Of course she is," Kevin said, pushing a pair of glasses up his nose. "It's your choice kid. Don't regret it."

Link hadn't even gone to see his parents. He was dropped off at the bus terminal and had hopped another bus to get to Tracy's house.

_Trace, I love you, I'm sorry, forgive me, she meant nothing to me, none of them meant a thing, the rest were just play dates, baby, chill! Be cool mama. A man has his needs. _The thoughts overlapped in his mind until the bus pulled to a stop two blocks from the Turnblad residence. Link fingered the necklace he had bought for Tracy as it rode boxless in his pocket. The charm on the end was a musical note. It was the prettiest thing he could find to bring her for her birthday. He ran his hand across the five o'clock shadow growing on his chin. It was too important to spend every moment of her birthday that he could with her before he broke the news. There would be a lot of forgiveness to beg. He began to fidget nervously. He reached into his pocket and looked around. No one was watching as he dipped his finger into a small paper baggie and retrieved some drugs. He dosed himself and then shoved the bag back into his pocket and headed to Tracy's house. He knocked on the door. He could hear music and laughter coming from the inside. Mrs. Turnblad's face froze when she was who was in the doorway.

"Link, I almost didn't recognize you," She said sadly. The Link she remembered was clean cut and well kept. This kid looked tired and rough around the edges.

"Is Tracy here? I've got to see her. I brought her a present. " Mrs. Turnblad looked over her shoulder to see her daughter laughing for the first time since two weeks before when the promise ring Seaweed gave Penny turned her finger green.

"I don't think now is such a good time, Link," her mother said.

"No, I have to see her. She's my girl!"

"When it's convenient for you, perhaps. You broke her heart and I'm just getting her back. What's wrong with you anyway? Have you looked at yourself? You look like you got dressed in the dark!"

"Ma! Who's at the door?" Tracy called cheerfully.

"No one, sweetheart!"

"Tracy, baby, it's me!" Link called over her mother. Link heard clattering and rustling and heavy footsteps as Tracy approached,

"Link!" she exclaimed. No malice tainted her voice. She didn't glare at him like her mother had upon seeing him. His hair was limp and swept to the side. His white shirt was half tucked in. She said nothing negative, only threw her arms around him and held him. Mrs. Turnblad frowned, but walked away. Penny and Seaweed scooted silently by. Link gave them both a small wave, and they waved back. Tracy didn't notice anyone else in the world. It made Link feel like a complete jerk. "I've missed you so much!"

"Happy birthday, Darlin'," he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the necklace. Tracy squealed with delight as he hooked the clasp behind her neck. He searched her shirt for his pin and

scowled when he didn't see it.

"Where is my pin?" he asked in an uncharacteristically cruel tone.

"L-link it's in my room. I thought you didn't love me anymore. I wasâ€¦ I was going to give it back."

Link scoffed. "So much for not giving up on me."

"So much for calling me!"

"I was working! What were you doing all that time? Hangin' out with friends? Spending time with Corny and Seaweed? Or is there some other guy you're not telling me about?"

"Link, what has gotten into you?" she asked, her brow furrowing. He shook his head in the negative.

"We need to talk in private. Now," he said, dragging her by her arm to her bedroom.

"Link, you're scaring me!" Tracy stumbled behind him. Link drug her into the bedroom and shut the door behind him.

"Sit please," he instructed, and Tracy had a seat while he paced the floor. "We seriously need to talk. And it's bad, babe. The record wants me to be a single guy, rolling with the punches, winking at the chicks, you know?"

"Oh," she said softly, her eyes falling to her lap.

"Baby, no, no, no," he said, lifting her chin with his index finger. "I can't lie to you. Iâ€¦ I failed you, Trace. I was intimate with other girls, but they meant nothing to me. Nothing at all. They like this image, but it isn't real. The real me is in here," he said, placing his hand over her heart, "with you. If I keep this up for just one more year-"

"You want to be unfaithful to me for a solid year?"

"I won't go that far again, I swear it. I just want to make a better life for us."

"That's such a joke, Link. I always wondered why my Mother worked so hard washing laundry and why my father didn't mind being holed up in his shop all day. It's because they not only love what they do, they love who they're with. Link, I'd be happy with you even if we lived in a box down the alley."

"Me too, baby, but I want to give you what you deserve. They're going to start recording my songs, Trace. I've got to do this."

"This is the same situation as when you wouldn't march with us, Link! You still can't see what's right!"

"What about you, Tracy? You don't understand what this means to me! Everything I have done has been for you!"

"No, Link, I'm pretty sure those girls you did were for yourself,"

Tracy said. Link shook his head angrily.

"So that's what you want then? To break up? I referred to you as my wife on tour, Trace."

"There was a time when being your wife was all I could think about."

"Was?"

"I'm sorry, Link. We've just grown too far apart. I don't feel like you love me."

"What's this then, eh?" he asked, swiping at the necklace he had just given her. "Nothing, right? You know that's real gold, Trace. And there can be much more."

"I don't want your gold," she said softly, reaching up to remove her necklace. She handed it back to him. "I want Link Larkin."

"I'm here, in the flesh!"

"This isn't y-", she was cut off by his mouth assaulting hers. He pressed his mouth so hard to hers that her teeth dug into her lips. Tracy pushed away. "That's not even how my Link kisses. My Link gives me butterflies. Youâ€¦ you scare me. There's something different about you."

"I get enough crap from everyone else, Trace. I don't need it from you, too. You don't want this? Fine. Throw away the pin if you want, see if I care. I won't bother you anymore, Ms. Turnblad," he snarled, shoving the necklace back into his pocket and storming out of the room. Tracy sobbed, rolling over on her bed.

She hadn't realized she had cried herself to sleep until the afternoon heat had warmed up her room. She wiped sweat from her forehead. She pushed herself up. She reached underneath her pillow and grabbed Link's pin. She would give it back to him. When she stood up, her toe kicked a small brown bag on the floor. She picked it up.

This must be Link's, she thought to herself. She slid it into her pocket.

"Tracy Turnblad, where are you going?" her mother called from the other room.

"Maybelle's! See ya!" she lied, the door slamming behind her before her mother could protest. Tracy ran down the stairs as fast as she could. She took the bus to Link's house. It seemed like the ride took an hour though it was only twenty minutes at best. She knocked softly on Link's front door. She heard yelling inside. Link's mother opened the door and slid her body around it and closed it behind her.

"Tracy, how nice to see you," she smiled.

"Is Link home?"

"Now really isn't a good time."

"Could you please just give him these for me, then?" she asked, handing Mrs. Larkin the pin and the bag.

"His pin?" she asked sadly, and Tracy's eyes welled up.

"Yes ma'am. And I don't know what's in the bag but I'm pretty sure it's his. I found it on my floor after he left."

"A baggie of what?" she asked, opening the small bag. Her eyes grew wide and then shrank sadly.

"Thank you, Tracy." Tracy nodded and walked away. Mrs. Larkin heard Tracy crying loudly before the door closed behind her.

"Where is it? Where in the hell is it? Where in the world-"

"Link!" his mother exclaimed. Link's hands were shaking and he turned furious eyes on his mother.

"Not now, ma!"

"Oh I think we had better talk about this now," she said. She held the top of the bag and it rolled out to full length in her hand.

"Where did you find that? That's what I've been looking for! Just give it here, Ma!"

"Tracy returned it to you."

"Tracy was here?"

"She also brought this," his mother showed him the pin. Link fell to his knees and ran his hands through his hair. "She didn't know what it was. Sonâ€¦ I think it would be best if you stayed in school."

"What? No! This is my big break! You wouldn't understand!"

"You're right! I wouldn't! But I do understand motherhood, and when my child,"

"I'm not a child anymore, mom! I'm a grown man!"

"Way to act like one, son."

"Don't you start in on me."

"This," she said, shaking the bag, "Isn't happening. And neither is this," she said, holding up his returned pin. "Music means everything to you, and Tracy and your family mean more than it does, right? So first order of business," she said, walking toward the bathroom.

"No! No, ma, please!" he ran after his mother as she dumped the contents of the bag into the toilet and flushed it. Link growled and slammed his palm into the wall.

"Link, we've got to sort you out, boy. What were you thinking?"

"I DON'T KNOW!" he yelled. "You just canned all of my stuff! What in the world were you thinking?"

"I was thinking I love my boy, and I wonder where he went."

"I'm not a boy."

"Then BE A MAN! Man up and tell Tracy you love her! Man up and tell people who offer you this stuff that you don't want it! You're a shadow of your former self, son, and for what? Think, Link! Use your head! You want to end up like James Dean?" Link's mother swiped at the tears that rolled down her cheeks. Link exhaled and slid down the wall. He held his hands in his head.

"No, mom. I want to do whatever it takes to live a decent, honest life."

"Then we've got to get you better."

"What about the tour?"

"There will be other opportunities."

"But Kevin saidâ€¦"

"You have got to get a hold of this addiction, son, before it kills you! Your life is more important than this. Besides, if the label sees you like this, you're not going to go very far."

"They said they want me footloose and free."

"I think you should take this down another avenue. I think you should finish school-"

"They won't wait for me to finish! What part of that can't you get through your stupid head!"

"Link Larkin, you will not speak to me that way."

"I'm sorry mom," he said, realization setting in. "My God, I'm so sorryâ€¦ I can't believe I would ever say such ugly words to you." He exhaled and closed his eyes. He leaned his head against the back of the wall. "Please call Tracy. She deserves the truth. I'm going to need her more than ever if I'm going to risk flushing my dreams down the toilet."

"You took that risk when you picked up drugs," his mother said. Link's head fell into his hands and nodded there in agreement.

"Tracy, pleaseâ€¦" he asked. He could hear his mother's heels clicking away. Twenty five thousand dollars could have done so much for Tracy and him. He had blown it. He couldn't risk losing her, too.

"Mrs. Turnblad I respectfully ask you to reconsider letting Tracy come over to our house!" Mrs. Larkin pleaded. After telling Tracy's mother the sordid story of just what Link had been up to all summer, Mrs. Turnblad had vehemently demanded that the teens stay away from

each other.

"You won't keep me away from him any better than Mrs. Pingleton keeps Penny and Seaweed apart," Tracy said.

"Tracy, you are not going to be involved with this. Link made his bed, and now he will sleep in it. If he becomes worthy of you again!"

"But what about when everyone thought I was not worthy of Link, Mamma?"

"That was a case of prejudice, Tracy. It had nothing to do with reckless behavior!"

"No one is pardoning my son Mrs. Turnblad, but I know he loves Tracy. She has been all he is worried about through this ordeal!"

"I'm sorry Mrs. Larkin, I don't think I can allow my daughter to be around him like this."

"I'm sorry, Mom, but there's no way you can stop me!"

"You step one foot out of that door, Tracy Turnblad, and I'll!"

"I don't care, mom! I love Link, and he loves me, I just know he does. He made a mistake. I can't abandon him for that. I have to try. Isn't love about compromise and trying and working things out versus the world together?"

"Truer words have rarely been spoken, Mrs. Turnblad. They are rather wise for a young woman."

"I suppose you're right, Mrs. Larkin," Tracy's mother sighed. "Alright. You may go see Link, but I disallow you to spend any extended period of unsupervised time together. Is that understood?"

"Respectfully so!" Tracy chirped. Her mother nodded. Tracy took Mrs. Larkin's hand and began running out the door so quickly that Mrs. Larkin wondered if she could keep up in her high heels.

Mrs. Larkin worried that leaving Link alone might afford him time to sneak away and seek more drugs on his own. To her relief, he was home, waiting for them. When Tracy walked through the door, he wrapped his arms around her. For the first time since she had met him, Link began to sob. Tracy began crying, unsure as to what she should do. Link had always been so strong! Link muttered incomprehensible terms of endearment into her hair, and Tracy stroked his back making soothing shushing noises. Link pulled away, wiping his cheeks with the backs of his hands.

"Some strong man I turned out to be."

"It takes a strong man to admit he's wrong. You took that a step further by wanting to fix it." Link took Tracy's hand and lead her to the couch in the living room.

"I was completely stupid," he said, wrapping his fingers around hers and clasping her hand tightly. "This is going to be hard, Trace. I

want it so bad. I feel like I need it, like I can't function without it."

"No, silly, it's me you can't function without," she joked. Link smirked in his characteristic way.

"I love you so much. Do you know that?"

"Your efforts have proven it, yes. I didn't think so earlier, but I know you have to now. "

"Do you love me?"

"I never stopped loving you."

"How many boys did you spend time with when I was gone?"

"Seriously?"

"Come on, Trace, it's just a question. So how many were there, like five? Ten?"

"Why are you acting like this?"

"Why won't you answer my question? Are you feeling guilty?"

"No, Link! There's been no one! There's never been anyone but you!"

"Do you swear?"

"Link Larkin, I've never had eyes for a soul but you!"

"Never?"

"Never ever. Oh Link, you never thought we'd live a normal life did you?" Tracy smiled at him, taking his hands in hers. "I knew things would always be adventurous and perhaps a little crazy because it was always so unlikely that you'd ever notice me. But you did, and that was my miracle. I never thought I could shake you up enough to make you notice me." Link kissed Tracy on the forehead.

"I remember once saying to you that this adventure was too big for me."

"Still a little embarrassed that I misconstrued what you were saying."

"It's beside the point that I'm trying to make, Trace. The point is that you put me on this pedestal and you're saying how incredible it is that I fell for you. You thought I was handsome, but what did you really know about me? Nothing, right? But you gave me a chance to prove what kind of person I am to you, too. You are my miracle, Tracy Turnblad. I can't imagine where I would be right now if I didn't have you to keep me grounded. I never saw myself walking down this path with you. I certainly never thought my light would dim before I could be the star I thought I was destined to be. I do know that if I were with anyone else, they never would have cared enough to fight for a

has-been. You're so adamant about doing what's right. I wonder if that's your reasoning with me."

"Of course I'm with you because it's right, but I don't think of things that are right as obligations. You aren't my obligation, you are my destiny." Link smiled, brushing her hair behind her ear.

"So you'll love me even if I gain a bunch of weight and lose all my hair?"

"So long as you don't change where it counts," she said, placing her hand over his heart. "Besides, you don't think you're going to stay skinny forever if I'm going to be cooking for you, do you?" Tracy laughed and Link joined her. It felt right to be with her. What was he thinking? A summer on the road without her was stupid. A year would have been unfathomable. He may have died in every sense of the word. Tracy Turnblad had saved his life yet again. He would go to any lengths to make sure that love and trust would never again be jeopardized.

Though it was soon understood that paranoia and excessive cravings as well as weight gain were to be expected, once Link had been taken the doctor for a proper examination, Tracy refused to give up on him. The months that rolled by were hard, especially for Link between the withdrawal symptoms and the label signing a different boy from the next city to take his place. Tracy reminded Link each day how pleasantly surprised she was to still have him all to herself. Link knew her statement was not a double entendre, but he still fought the wicked thoughts that ran through his mind that said to him that Tracy wanted for him to stay and she was pleased with his loss. Link knew this wasn't remotely true, but he still fought the thoughts. He had lost his one and only shot, and soon he would be working a nine to five manual labor job if he were ever going to be anyone worthy of Tracy. His heart warmed when he thought of Tracy but it simultaneously ached with an irreplaceable loss. With his shot blown, Link Larkin would never be anyone impressive to anyone but Tracy. He wondered why she wasn't sufficiently taking the place of his misplaced career, especially considering that Corny Collins had welcomed him with open arms, pending mandatory drug tests for his own good. These tests were confidential, of course, with only Tracy, her family and Link's family being in the loop.

Link relearned to love the Corny Collins show. He loved highlighting Tracy by letting her do fancier moves than he did. He loved singing into a microphone he clutched in one hand while swaying gently with Tracy wrapped up in his other arm. The horror of his past summer and the reality of all he lost eased with every step they took and every note he sang. He planned to treasure every last moment of his final year on the Corny Collins show.

School had been easier to deal with than he'd thought. People still loved him, and thanks to the stunt he pulled on the Miss Hairspray pageant, the whole school had been integrated. Lunch, classrooms, hops, pep rallies, even the sports teams. The school hummed livelier than before as students and teachers both black and white put aside their differences and learned to appreciate each other as equals.

On the Corny Collins show, Tracy and Link had become so popular that none of the other council members on the integrated show really minded that they often shared the spotlight. Seaweed had convinced

Penny to sing with him a couple of times, but her dancing still left a little to be desired. Penny's mother had disowned her devil daughter and she had since been living with Seaweed under the careful supervision of Motormouth Maybelle. Once unnoticed by most, Penny was now a hip girl who gave insight to curious girls about what it was like to be a checkerboard chick. Penny, after starting French classes, coined the phrase Checkerboard Chic in reference to interracial coupling. Many students were surprised to find their parents were perfectly fine with their choices in partners, but equally bummed to discover that rules and curfews still had to be respectfully followed.

As school and the show neared ending and Little Inez had yet again won Miss Hairspray having narrowly outdanced Tracy for the spot, Link became fidgety. Tracy noticed, but she tried to give him space to work on it. This would be a big test. Would he count on her?

Their last day on the Corny Collins show, Link left the studio without a word to anyone, not even Tracy. No one saw him for three days. When he finally returned home, he went directly to Tracy's house. Tracy threw her arms around him, pleased to see he had not been using. "If you love someone," her mother once told her, "Set them free. They'll come around if it's meant to be."

"I thought about using again, Trace," he said after dinner when they were alone in her bedroom. They were sitting on her bed facing each other, and Link was tracing shapes all over her face with his fingertips. "I thought I needed to chase that high, but when I left to talk to Scotty, something clicked in my brain. I realized the only high I ever wanted to chase was the high I get when I'm dancing with you. I went to Scotty's house anyway. He lives in Buena Vista. That's in California."

"I knew that!"

"As much as you slept in class, I wasn't sure!" Link beamed and Tracy scowled. He kissed her chastely on the lips. Her anger melted away as quickly as it had come. "While I was there I learned that the kid who took my place was so terrible that the band broke up and they packed the kid home after three weeks. Scotty is trying to get the band back together and he wants me to do lead vocals."

"I don't know if I'm okay with this, Link. These are the same people who convinced you to do drugs."

"I did those on my own. It's my fault and I accept that."

"But Link!"

"Just hear me out, okay? Trust me," he stated simply and stared into her eyes. Tracy realized she was completely unable to do otherwise. She gave a curt nod and Link continued. "I turned down his offer, and I explained to him everything that had happened, even why I had boarded the plane in the first place. I related to him that you are my high, and he respected that. Scotty was the only one on that bus who ever had the courage to say no. Now I do. You're my courage," he paused because Tracy began to tear up. "No, no, no, no, no!" he said, wiping the tears from her face. "There's more, okay? Scotty and I went to have lunch and while we were there we bumped into Kevin. Then Kevin is going on and on about how he would still love to represent

me if I ever changed my mind and how different things could be and that talent like ours was hard to find. When he said 'ours', Trace, he was talking about us. He wants to try a new angle. He wants a married couple to sing and dance together. A young and hip married couple and since you're also unconventionally pretty it would have the added bonus of making people look further into themselves and into others and it reminded me of that day when you looked up at me with those pretty brown eyes and told me that marching was the right thing to do. I mean, that has been such a huge part of our lives, right? So anyway, I say to him that I don't know if you would want to ever marry me, amazing as you are, and-"

"Link?"

"He's all 'Come on, Larkin, grow up. You said you loved her, right?' And of course I do. I love you Tracy Turnblad, and I don't care if we spend the rest of our lives dancing on a stage together or flipping hamburgers together-"

"Link," she smiled.

"I want the rest of that life to be with you, because Tracy you mean the world to me. And I fell in love with that hippy little chick with the ratted out 'do and I still love your hair even though it is soft and long and I love that you always stand up for what's right even when it isn't popular and that you believed in me and Seaweed despite any preconceived notions about either of us and that-"

"Link Larkin, will you marry me?"

"I always-WHAT?"

"You heard me."

"No, that's all wrong, you can't ask me this!"

"But you weren't getting to the point you're trying to make."

"Take it back!"

"I could never. I want to marry you. I want to be with you forever. Soâ€| marry me, Link Larkin!" she beamed.

"Yes, little darlin'! I will marry you!" he laughed, throwing his arms around her. Tracy laughed with him. Link pulled away and stared deep into her eyes. He withdrew a ring from his pocket and slid it onto her finger. "There's only one condition I ask of you."

"Anything, Link!"

"Let me keep my last name," he chuckled. Tracy smacked his arm and laughed with him. His face became serious. Link wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her in for their first kiss as a betrothed couple, a kiss he hoped to mark as the start of the rest of their lives together.

End
file.